

# THE EFFECT OF DIALECT ON RATING OF INTELLIGENCE

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*The Bell Curve will be debated for sometime ... it brings back to life a rich tradition of sociological speculation about such issues as the importance of cognition, relationship between cognition and class position and the moral benefits and pitfalls of meritocracy. These are questions that have been around for close to two centuries. One ventures to guess that they will be around for the next two centuries as well. (Fraser, 1995, p. 122)*

### ABSTRACT

To validate the "power of language" theory, the authors set out to ascertain whether there is any relationship between dialect (language) and intelligence rating. This study suggests that language is a barometer by which people measure one's intelligence and education. The study further suggests that nonstandard English may influence the perception that the individual is not intelligent. The American public favors people who use standard English and tends to discredit those who use nonstandard English.

*Keywords: Intelligence, Dialect, Language, Cognition.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the question alluded in the quotation above asks about the crucial relationship between language and cognition. According to the Oxford American Dictionary (1980), language is a system of words, signs and symbols used for conveying information in one or more countries adhering to a particular style of wording. This system of words, etc., sociolinguists refer to as the "genre of language use". According to Richard-Amato & Snow (1992), "Genre refers to the type or kind of organizing units into which smaller units of language such as conversations, sentences, lists or directives may fit. Each cultural group has fundamental genres that occur in recurrent situations; and each genre is so patterned as a whole that listeners can anticipate by the opening formulas what is coming--a joke, a story, or a recounting of shared past experiences" (p. 119). Ever since the late 19th century, students of language and culture have been pondering the ideas of Dialect DeSaussure (1949), which explain the dynamic interrelatedness of personal, social and intellectual discourse in any group or culture.

According to Brislin (1981), "the language that people

learn as children presents them with concepts, structures, and vocabulary which forms the basis for reacting to out-group members and/or strangers" (p. 30). This language behavior manifests itself in the way humans first learn to talk with people not in close personal relations, whom they perceive as out-group members, and who may speak with different accents or in a different dialect.

Within the bureaucratic world and workplaces of every society, institutions require expertise in some arbitrarily chosen genre which is governed by its own set of rules. The choice of sentence structures or the explanation of the meanings of words depends upon the immediate context of the genre users and their unique language structure. In actuality, words have no inherent meaning given them by some independent power. They have the consensus meanings people in an ever-widening community give them (Ozmon & Craver, 1995). Furthermore, in the normal usage of language, people construct, invent and play unique metaphors, "language games," or "systems" of communication. Understanding the free play of these language games can help one to understand some unusual patterns of genre usage by showing how they

differ and parallel similar expressions of a preferred language.

Speaking a language, therefore, is a special kind of coded behavior, to the extent that when a person does not speak a preferred language as is desired or expected in a society, that person may be perceived as an ignorant individual who does not share the same social knowledge and concepts as others (Franklin & Platt, 1994). Obviously, this underlying bias can cause one to come across or interact with people negatively when they do not speak the standard language (e.g., English) as expected or desired. One may unconsciously or unintentionally be attributing low mental ability or illiteracy to them. One may tend to speak to them more slowly and louder than usual. In effect, one may unconsciously be condescending to them, reacting as they would with children in our society.

In 1868, the Indian Peace Commission's report on Indian education and civilization stated that differences in language were a major source of continuing friction between the Anglo-Americans and the Native Americans. Therefore, the document emphasized that the teaching of English [standard English] would be a major step in reducing hostilities and civilizing Native Americans. "Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in the process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated" (Spring, 1994, p.18). Clearly, this historical example shows the political insensitivity couched in the Dialect imposition of a preferred language on a genre community. Cross, DeVaney, and Jones (2001) showed that listeners do evaluate speakers' personal characteristics on the basis of dialect and that race is a factor in the perception of language, since white respondents were most favorable to white speakers and least favorable to black speakers and black respondents were most favorable to black speakers and least to white speakers.

Within the pluralistic context of American society and education, however, several general concerns have been associated with school success in particular, and life success in general. Principal among these concerns

has been language tolerance, especially for "Black dialect" and how it is perceived by educators and the general public. For some people, Black English has been viewed as a rich resource, but for others Black English became a stigma. That is, for those who can easily and appropriately "switch gears" from standard to Black English, Black English is a very good linguistic tool, but for those who can't--those who are hopelessly locked in to using only Black English--it is a deficit. According to Kushner, McClelland, and Safford (1992), the disproportionately large representation of ethnic and linguistic minorities among students referred to and placed in special education--especially the high-incidence categories of those educable students with mild mental retardation, those with emotional-behavioral handicap, and those with speech-language handicap in our school systems--may be due to minorities' use or "misuse" or the English language in the classroom.

The significance of this educational malpractice enlarges when its effects on children's thinking is seen. It is believed that language is so important to thinking it is almost inconceivable that one could think at all without it. Confused thinking may well be the result of poor use of words in the thinking process (Ozman & Craver, 1995). Thus, educators throughout the centuries have been asked to be attuned to the logical complexities of language because language is a complex cultural development and words have a variety of meanings and usages (Ozman & Craver, 1995; Dandy, 1991).

The argument has also been made many times that our thinking may even be governed in whole or in part by language and the meanings of words. It is difficult to conceive of thoughts without language, and what thinking one do can be expressed only in some kind of language. Some people believe that without language symbols (verbal, written, pictured, gestured), one would have no means of communication. And many think that since thinking is so dependent on language, thinking problems are also language problems (Myers & Myers, 1995). Despite this fact, normative language instruction continues to be the singular mandate.

Several models of bilingual and/or multicultural education

have their proponents and opponents who have drawn the battle lines around the use of English language alone or English language plus other English dialects in our nation's classrooms (Kushner, et.al. 1992). Thus, sociolinguistics (the study of the formal and informal rules about how, when, what, to whom and how long to speak in conversations within cultural groups) is being seriously looked at in the education system (Myers & Myers, 1995).

While most are aware of the fact that the issue of requiring a standard American English in the schools is very sensitive and controversial, few may know the close relationship between ethnic minority groups and their dialects even though these dialects are often considered non-standard. To some people, the requirement that standard English be spoken in classrooms is considered discriminatory because this requirement places an additional burden on the non-standard English and non-English speaking students. It is argued that this requirement denies these ethnic minority students the same educational opportunities as their standard-English speaking counterparts (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994; Noll, 1995).

On the other side of this debate are also those who argue that non-standard English and the non-English speaking students must be taught standard English to enable them to cope with the demands of our society and to succeed in the competitive economic world. Inability to speak standard English can be a disadvantage to the individual in certain situations, and especially in seeking employment (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994). It is further argued that differences in dialect in schools create some subtle problems for the nonstandard English speaking ethnic minority students. Too often educators, school personnel and other individuals tend to make erroneous assumptions about non-standard English speakers, believing that their inability to speak a standard English is indicative of a lower I.Q. Furthermore, non-standard English speakers are not taken seriously professionally or educationally (Gehrmann, 2007). They are often stereotyped in terms of their ability to sell themselves, their ability to create a positive image about themselves socially or ethnically, and their ability to create

professional and educational opportunities for themselves. There is also a universal feeling that nonstandard-English speakers are not very smart. In fact, many are quickly dismissed as being "just plain stupid."

This suggests that language is often a predictor by which many people measure one's intelligence. Language facility, in fact, often determines one's level of intelligence, one's social or educational status, one's ability and one's promotability. Users of the standard dialect may be less likely to be criticized or stigmatized by the public, while users of a nonstandard dialect (particularly if these users are members of a minority group that is already socially stigmatized) are criticized and frequently denied educational and professional mobility because of their language disability. Their language marks them "outsiders" and "outcasts" with regard to the mainstream public.

Language often does emit strong social, educational, and ethnic commentary about its speaker(s). Quotations turned adages offer further insight into this premise:

*"First among the evidences of an education, I name correctness and precision in the use of the mother tongue."*

Nicholas Murray Butler

*"Language most shows a man speak that I may see thee."*

Ben Johnson

*"Language is the dress of thought; every time you talk your mind is on parade."*

Anonymous

*"The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world."*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

## Purpose

Based upon these popular assumptions and having observed such practices among educators and prospective employers, the researchers set out to test this theory about the power of language. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to find out what associations people make with language and thinking, i.e., how do people correlate nonstandard English speaking with intelligence,

particularly for those speaking with a "black" dialect. The research hypothesis is that dialect and intelligence rating are related in some manner.

## Method

The researchers decided to use one individual who has a master's degree in English and is the director of a university writing laboratory. She speaks both the standard English and the Black dialect proficiently, and can shift into "different gears" in her usage of the English language depending upon the situation and the environment.

For tape recording purposes, the researchers wrote a number of questions that were meant to illicit the perceptions and opinions of people about education in this university community and the country as a whole. The director of the Writing Laboratory wrote down her answers to these questions in order to make sure that the contents of the answers would be the same on both tapes. Then the researchers created a nonstandard English script containing common expressions in black dialect. This script was transcribed using standard English expressions and grammar. Often the vocabulary was elevated to create some semblance of "intellectual sophistication".

On Tape 2, the speaker answered the questions posed by one of the authors in standard English, and on Tape 1 she answered the same questions in nonstandard, Black "in-the-hood" dialect. After tape recording her answers, the two tapes were taken to her family home where the researchers invited all the family members, and some neighbors-boys and girls, men and women, old and young-to listen to the tapes and to give feedback (e.g., face validity). Their responses were unanimous. The speaker on Tape 2 was a smart, educated person. The speaker's mother, a 75-year-old also responded to the tape. Her responses and that of the speaker's sister to the speaker on Tape 1 was rather startling. "Who is that stupid woman?" they both asked. "Why did you bother to interview such a stupid person; what would she know about education? Obviously she is not educated".

To our surprise also, none of the other family members could recognize the speaker on Tape 1 as the voice of their own family member, although they recognized the

voice of Speaker 2 as that of their family member. Various faculty colleagues also listened to the tapes but could not detect that the speakers on the tapes were one and the same person. After these validity tests of the tape recordings, the researchers wrote a questionnaire (see Figure 1) and gave copies of it to a random sample of middle school, high school, and college students of different racial and cultural backgrounds. Half of the students (randomly selected) were asked to answer the questions after listening to Tape 1 and then Tape 2, while the other half had a reversed order. Copies of the questionnaire were also given to members of the community randomly selected to listen to the tapes and to complete the questionnaire. There were 833 subjects involved in this study.

### Speaker 1 and Speaker 2

Please circle your responses.

Your background information:

1. RACE a) White b)Black c) Asian d) Hispanic e) Native f) American
2. AGE a) 14-17 b) 18-22 c) 23-28 d) 35-40 e) 41-50 f) 51-60 g) 61+
3. EDUCATION a) middle school b)high school c) college d) graduate

4. What do you think is the speaker's educational level?

- a) no education b) grade school c)high school  
d) college/university e) graduate

Reason(s) for your answer:

5. Do you think the speaker is a professional or a nonprofessional?

- a) professional b) nonprofessional

Reason(s) for your answer:

6. Rate the speaker's intelligence.

- a) smart average intelligence b) below average  
c) intelligence dumb

Reason(s) for your answer:

7. What do you think is the speaker's ethnic background?

- a) Asian b)Black c) Hispanic d) Native American  
e) White



Reason(s) for your answer:

8. What do you think is the speakers age?  
a) 14-17 b) 18-24 c) 25-35 d) 36-50 e) 50+

Reason(s) for your answer:

9. Would you befriend this person? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

10. Would you date a person like this? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

11. Would you want a person like this in your neighborhood? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

12. Would you want your children to associate with this person's children? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

13. Would you hire this person? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

14. If yes, in what capacity?  
a) professional sales b) domestic office/clerical

Reason(s) for your answer:

15. Would you work for this person? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

16. Would you want this person to teach or work with your children? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

17. Would you want someone who speaks like this to be your teacher? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

18. Would you do business with this person? a) Yes b) No

Reason(s) for your answer:

Figure 1. Language Questionnaire Used for Evaluation

## Results

A five-way frequency analysis was performed to develop a logit model of intelligence rating (for details of this analysis see Goodman, 1978; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Predictors were speaker, age (less than 30 vs. 30 and up), race (white vs. black vs. other), and amount of education (no college vs. college). Speaker 1 spoke using a combination of standard English (questions) and Black

dialect (answers), while Speaker 2 used the standard English (both questions and answers). Two different frequency analyses were conducted, with questions 4 and 6 as criterion variables. Question 4 dealt with a rating of the speaker's educational level. Of particular interest to this study was question 6, which dealt with a rating of each speaker's intelligence.

Eight hundred and thirty-three subjects provided usable data for this analysis. All component two-way contingency tables showed expected frequencies in excess of five. All cells were adequately predicted by the model after analysis.

The nonhierarchical logit analysis of question 4 (speaker's education rating) produced only one significant two-way interaction, EDUCATION by SPEAKER. A chi-square analysis was administered on these two variables ( $\chi^2(1, N = 833) = 12.4, p < 0.001$ ). A significant difference was found in the rating of both speakers. Subjects predominately rated the Black dialect as indication of no college education (92%), while relatively few felt the same way about the standard English (4%).

The nonhierarchical logit analysis of question 6 (speaker's intelligence rating) produced a model with three two-way associations (INTELLIGENCE by SPEAKER, INTELLIGENCE by AGE, and INTELLIGENCE by EDUCATION), the three-way association (INTELLIGENCE by SPEAKER by AGE), the four-way association (INTELLIGENCE by SPEAKER by AGE by RACE), and the first-order effect of the dependent variable, INTELLIGENCE. The model had adequate fit between observed and expected frequencies (likelihood ratio  $G^2(34) = 26.61, p = 0.813$ ). The model produced reasonable expected frequencies; moreover, reduction in uncertainty in prediction of intelligence by the model was moderate, with concentration of 0.33.

A summary of the model with results of tests of significance (partial likelihood ratio  $G^2$ ) and loglinear parameter estimates in raw and standardized form appears in Table 1.

Subjects were more likely to rate average or above intelligence (74%) than below intelligence, overall. The percentages vary significantly with speaker however,

Effect	Partial association chi-square			Loglinear parameter estimate (lambda)			Lambda/SE			
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence				0.036	0.498	-0.534	0.485	8.120	-8.605	
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence by speaker	11.24*	Speaker 1		-1.362	0.248	1.114	-19.672	4.274	15.398	
	df = 2	Speaker 2		1.362	-0.248	-1.114	19.672	-4.274	-15.398	
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence by age	22.46*	Less than 30		-0.109	0.006	0.103	-1.434	0.091	1.343	
	df = 4	30 or above		0.109	-0.006	-0.103	1.434	-0.091	-1.343	
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence by education	14.45*	No College		-0.046	-0.134	0.180	-0.767	-3.231	3.998	
	df = 2	College		0.046	0.134	-0.180	0.767	3.231	-3.998	
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence by speaker by age	19.22*	<30	Age	Speaker	Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below
			1	-0.320	-0.141	0.461	-3.070	-1.743	4.813	
		2	0.320	0.141	-0.461	3.070	1.743	-4.813		
		30 up	1	0.320	0.141	-0.461	3.070	1.743	-4.813	
	2		-0.320	-0.141	0.461	-3.070	-1.743	4.813		
		White	<30	1	-0.076	0.095	-0.019	-0.789	0.788	-0.001
			2	0.076	-0.095	0.019	0.789	-0.788	0.001	
		30 up	1	0.076	-0.095	0.019	0.789	-0.788	0.001	
2			-0.076	0.095	-0.019	-0.789	0.788	-0.001		
				Above	Average	Below	Above	Average	Below	
Intelligence by speaker by age by race	11.85**	Black	<30	1	0.170	-0.066	-0.104	2.432	-0.738	-1.694
			2	-0.170	0.066	0.104	-2.432	0.738	1.694	
			30 up	1	-0.170	0.066	0.104	-2.432	0.738	1.694
				2	0.170	-0.066	-0.104	2.432	-0.738	-1.694
		Other	<30	1	-0.094	-0.190	0.284	-1.643	-0.050	1.693
			2	0.094	0.190	-0.284	1.643	0.050	-1.693	
			30 up	1	0.094	0.190	-0.284	1.643	0.050	-1.693
				2	-0.094	-0.190	0.284	-1.643	-0.050	1.693

\* p < 0.001  
\*\* p < 0.003

Table 1. Summary of Logit Model of Intelligence, N = 833

subjects rated Speaker 1 as being "above average intelligence" 4.9% overall, with Speaker 2 rated at 75.6%. The percentages also vary with respect to age and amount of education of the rater. Those subjects less than 30 years of age had a much higher percentage (30%) of rating "below" intelligence than subjects at least 30 years old (15%). Those subjects with no college education tended to give more "below average intelligence" ratings (33%) than did those subjects with some college education (21%).

The three-way association relating intelligence to a joint function of speaker and age is illustrated in Figure 2. Younger subjects tended to be more extreme in their rating of both speakers. For speaker 1, those less than 30 years of age gave a lower rating of intelligence than those at least 30 years old. However, this difference was opposite for speaker 2. In this case, those less than 30 years of age rated speaker 2 significantly "smarter" than the older group of subjects. One should note, however, that Speaker 1 was still rated significantly lower in intelligence than Speaker 2.

The complex four-way association relating intelligence rating to a joint function of speaker, age, and race is illustrated in Figure 3. Younger white subjects are slightly more extreme than the subjects of other races in their ratings of the intelligence of both speakers. For example, young white subjects gave Speaker 2 a higher rating than did the other young subjects with different racial backgrounds. However, this association does not hold for

the older subjects. The older white subjects are less extreme in their ratings compared to the other races. These subjects tended to be more tolerant of Speaker 1 while less so with Speaker 2. In fact, older black subjects tended to be more extreme in their ratings of both speakers (i.e., more critical of the nonstandard English while less so with the standard English). Again, one should note that Speaker 1 was rated significantly lower in intelligence than Speaker 2.

None of the remaining associations that included intelligence rating was statistically significant.

## Discussion

From the data analysis, this study shows that overall, there was a significant difference between the intelligence ratings of Speaker 2 (standard English user) and Speaker 1 (Nonstandard English user). Specifically, Speaker 2 was rated by all subjects (N=833) in the study as predominantly "above average" intelligence, while speaker 1 was rated as "below average" intelligence.

The study also shows other associations of significance, such as the difference between speaker ratings by age of rater. Those subjects less than 30 years of age rated Speaker 2 significantly higher in intelligence than those subjects over 30 years of age. However, those subjects less than 30 years of age rated Speaker 1 significantly lower in intelligence than did those over 30 years of age. In other words, younger subjects were more critical of the nonstandard English speaker than the older subjects were. Second, a significant difference was found to exist

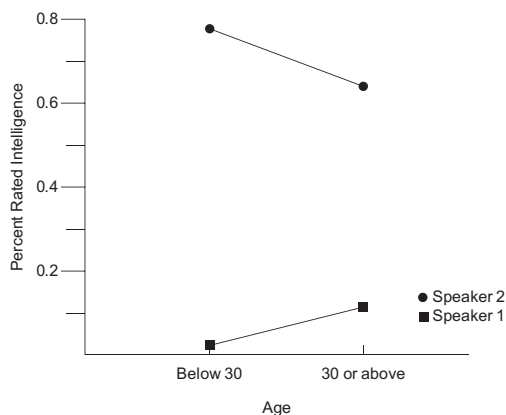


Figure 2. Interaction Plot of Intelligence rating by Speaker by Age

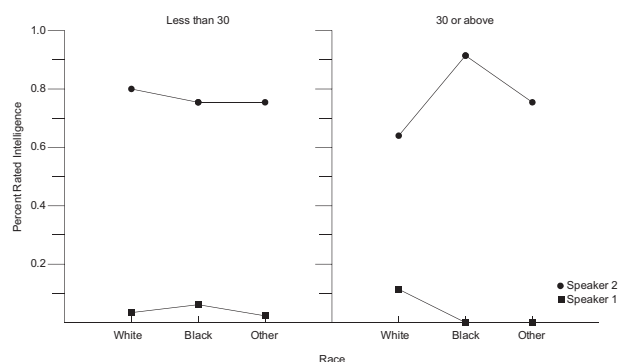


Figure 3. Interaction Plot of Intelligence Rating by Speaker by Race

between speaker ratings by age and race. For Speaker 2, there was a significant difference in intelligence ratings among the races, across different age groups. For the subjects less than 30 years of age, white subjects rated this speaker as slightly more intelligent than did the blacks and the other group. However, for those subjects above 30 years of age, the black subjects rated this speaker as having higher intelligence than the other races did.

The black subjects under 30 years of age rated Speaker 1's intelligence slightly higher than the other races did. But for those above 30, Speaker 1 was rated as having lower intelligence by more blacks and other groups (minorities) than whites. In other words, the older blacks and other minority groups were more critical of Speaker 1 (nonstandard English user) than were the white subjects. (See Figures 2 & 3).

In summary, this study shows that people associate nonstandard English dialect with lower intelligence. Although this perception or association can change somewhat with age and with combination of age and race, the overall evaluation by the general public is that nonstandard English is always associated with lower I.Q.

What then are the implications of this study for proponents and opponents of bidialectical, bilingual, and monolingual education? Although some educators and minority groups may advocate for the use of English dialects in our nation's classrooms, the American public--"the real world"--does not accept these dialects as markers of "intellectual sophistication."

## Conclusion

There is general agreement on the importance of language in human cognition, and even in the different ways we use this necessary skill. The ability to use language sets humans apart from other animals and accounts, at least partly, for the uniqueness of our cognitive profile. We would definitely be a very different species were it not for this awesome skill. Yet the usage of language comes with a price – a judgment of intelligence based upon certain inflections in that speech.

So all we can say for sure is that language, like so many

other aspects of human behavior, has proven to be the product of nature and nurture working together. This amazing human ability to communicate through language is both the result and the cause of our uniqueness as human beings. Language is a tool indeed: Simple enough for a child to effortly grasp, yet so complex that we may never completely understand just how genetics and experience interact to produce this most integral human trait. Dialect can be thought of as a covariate in this process – a most unwelcome covariate.

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Brandon Vaughn's current research interests include: multi-level differential item functioning (DIF), Bayesian estimation procedures, creative uses of non-parametric classification procedures, and effective strategies in the teaching of statistics. He has developed several technological tools for teaching statistics, including free R tutorial videos and applets for conceptual understanding.



Godfrey Franklin is a well-established researcher in issues of multicultural applications and education. He has investigated various issues of ethnic influence on academics including how speech affects a person's perception of intelligence. He is currently the executive director of the Office for International and Intercultural Developments at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, FL.



Mamie Hixon is the recipient of the 2008 Distinguished Faculty Service Award for her exemplary community service to the university and the surrounding communities. Among Hixon's noteworthy service contributions are the Grammar Hotline, which was recently featured in a NY Times article; her productions of *Our Voices Are Many* (a theatrical presentation of African-American literature), her membership on various boards including Pensacola 450th Celebration committee, her contributions to *Images in Black, a Pictorial of Black Pensacola*; her local AM radio grammar program; her conducting grammar workshops for various professional groups; and her being a motivational speaker. This is Hixon's second time receiving the award. She first received the Distinguished Faculty Service Award in 1993. Hixon is co-editor of all four volumes of *When Black Folks Was Colored*, a publication of the African-American Heritage Society, Pensacola, Florida, and has produced and directed four African-American poetry readings called *Our Voices Are Many*. She compiled and edited a chapbook collection of essays and poems about Alzheimer's disease called *Remembering Those Who Can't Remember*, published by Alzheimer's Family Services, Inc.

